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ABSTRACT

American commitment to education is not just a commitment to access but to excellence as well. We need to ask again the hard questions about our academic purposes. Is there a conscious organization to the curriculum today? The answer is a cautious affirmative, for the goal of diversity has taken us, academically, far from shore. A college curriculum that suggests that students have nothing in common is as flawed as one that suggests they are all alike. A new core curriculum should be built on the central porposition that we do have common experiences that can and must be shared. We should begin to rediscover the true meaning of liberal education. (Author/MSE)

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THE CASE FOR A COMMON CORE

Keynote address of

Ernest L. Boyer

United States Commissioner of Education

at the joint

University of California/California State University

and Colleges Conference

"Undergraduate Education: Beyond the Disciplines"

Asilomar, California

Friday, April 28, 1978

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President Saxon, Chancellor Dumke, it's a great pleasure to be at this important session.

One hundred and twenty years ago, the Reverend Horace Bushnell -- an early tourist in these parts -- said that:

> "Whoever wishes, for health's sake or for any other reason, to change the sceneries or the objects and associations of his life, should set off, not for Europe, but for California."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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I'm not sure whether I'm here "for health's sake" or "for any other reason" -- but in either event I'm

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delighted to join the faculties and administrators of two great public universities as you confront a question crucial to the future of this Nation.

I

I mention Reverend Bushnell in part because he was among the first to lend his voice to the call for a college in California.

Of course Bushnell's dream was magnificantly fulfilled. An absolutely splendid system of institutions was established and today this State -- like the entire Nation -- proudly affirms its commitment to higher education access for all qualified citizens.

Frederick Rudolph puts it this way in his thoughtful new history of the American college:

> "In recent years, as society has redefined higher education from being a privilege to being a right and a duty, it has 'moved in' on colleges and universities in a way that has made university and society almost inseparable."

Rudolph summarizes his point by saying

> "The California system of higher education <u>is</u> California."

o o o

For nearly three and one half centuries, the expansion of educational opportunity has continued to be a central public policy in this Nation.

In America, we have continued to affirm that education and democracy are inextricably interlocked.

This goal -- this commitment to equal educational opportunity -- is still an unfinished agenda in this Nation, and it must be vigorously pursued.

II

But this evening I wish to suggest that the American commitment to education

--is not just a commitment to access to our schools and colleges;

--it is a commitment to excellence as well.

And while we celebrate the dream of expanding opportunity, it is essential that we focus not only on the entry point to college, but on its ends as well.

We need to ask again the hard questions about our academic purposes.

We need, to quote the charge to this conference, "to take a fresh look at the core of experiences which educated citizens must share in order to participate in a community based on common knowledge and skills."

o o o

Reverend Bushnell -- before applauding the idea of a college for California -- had this rather versatile comment to offer to his readers "back East":

> "The first and most difficult thing to apprehend respecting California is the climate.... But this is scarcely possible, without dismissing, first of all, the word 'climate,' and substituting the plural 'climates.'
>
> For it cannot be said of California... that it has a climate. On the contrary, it has a great multitude of them, curiously pitched together, at short distances, one from another, defying too, our most accepted notions of the effects of latitude and altitude and the defences of mountain ranges."

I hope it isn't cavalier to suggest that Reverend Bushnell's observations on the climate have some bearing on the college curriculum.

At least that's the train of thought provoked by one student upon graduating from the University of California:

> The student wrote, "All these studies were simply separate tasks that bore no definite intrinsic relation to each other." "The right studies were there; what was lacking was the conscious organization of them for the student."

That's what one new alumnus said -- in 1903.

o o o

It's that lingering tantalizing question -- is there indeed a "conscious organization" to the curriculum -- that brings us here tonight.

I hasten to add that this does not mean an absolutely rigid course of study for every student, just as no one -- not even a benevolent despot -- would attempt to engineer a single uniform climate for the Golden State.

And I should confess -- at the very outset -- that my own answer to that question is a cautious yes.

After all--

- o To claim that our Nation is not one culture, but many;
- o to assert the rights of minorities;
- o to protect individual liberties from mass tyrannies;
- o to preserve the right to dissent, even to disobey--these are all keys to liberty. And to the extent that they have flowered in our midst, and have been affirmed by diversity on campus -- to that extent we may be justly proud.

III

But this story of diversity, with all of its validity and vision, has because of excess an unhappy sequel.

I believe that -- academically at least -- the undertow of diversity has pulled us far from shore.

Today the safest thing one can say about a college diploma is that the student probably has been around the campus for about four years.

Today we seem more confident of the length of a college education than we do about its substance.

On many campuses, almost all so-called required courses have been dropped, and the ones which do remain reveal a staggering incoherence of purpose, often expressed as "distribution requirements" -- which all too often is a nice name for "clutter."

Every core curriculum experiment of the past (and this issue has been cyclical of course) was guided by some vision of coherence.

The classical curriculum that prevailed from the founding of Harvard College to the Revolution was based on the notion of

- o a shared social structure,
- o a communal view as to how all young minds should be trained,
- o and a common belief in God, an afterlife, the church, and the "rights" and "wrongs" that should govern life.

The modest, general education reforms from the Revolution to the Civil War did not challenge coherence. Rather they reinforced it. Science and technology and modern history were added to the rigid and required curriculum because society's self-image had expanded, not fragmented.

And paradoxically the race toward "free electives" which followed was in its own way rooted in "commonality." But what was "common" was the freedom of self-determination; what was "shared" was the right to be autonomous and unique.

When general education languished and died, it was largely because the commonality of self triumphed over the commonality of substance.

Radical individualism offered a more powerful and accurate image of the times than the earlier social anchor points.

o o o

Here I must insert an important caveat.

I happen to believe that students must be free to follow their own interests, to develop their own aptitudes, and to pursue their own goals.

After all--

Knowledge <u>has</u> expanded and
we <u>have</u> learned something
about individual differences--

But truly educated persons also

- must move beyond themselves,
- must gain social perspectives,

- must see themselves in relation to other people and times,
- must understand how their origins and wants and needs are tied to the origins and wants and needs of others. Such perspectives are central to the academic quest.

IV

My point is this:

A college curriculum that suggests that students have nothing in common is just as flawed as one that suggests that all students are alike. And I believe that a new core curriculum should be built on the central proposition that we do have common experiences which can and must be shared.

There is of course no single combination of courses to capture the essence of our oneness. But I'd like to suggest several possibilities to illustrate the point.

First, we share a common heritage, and we do have an obligation to help the human race remember where it has been--and how, for better or worse, it got to where it is.

o All students must be introduced to the events, individuals, the great ideas and great literature that have contributed consequentially to human gains and losses.

o An understanding of this past from which all of us have come should be required of all students.

Obviously, to talk about "our heritage" has a familiar ring. But a notion need not be rejected just because it is familiar, and if our schools and colleges do not help keep the past alive, we will not only have lost our past, we will have lost our future, too.

Here I should insert a word of caution.

It is not enough to be told that events have occurred, ideas have been thought, and people have been born and have died. It is not enough to be told that great literature has been written -- as important as this heritage may be.

o The successful approach will always ask of past events what they have to do with us.

Perhaps we need to pick a dozen or so moments which are most consequential. To make that selection, our criteria would surely include

o the density of the moment (that is, the way it serves as a magnet for social, economic, political, and intellectual forces);

o the degree to which the event is the "crystallization of a historic characteristic" (for example, the neoclassic);

o or a historic transition (for example, Newton);

o and the way in which that moment radiates out to include ourselves.

o To choose a few things carefully; to study them intensively and across disciplinary lines; and through them to see our own times -- these goals may be adequate for the new core -- rooted in our common heritage.

V

Second, we all confront the challenges of the present -- and our quality education should reflect this fact.

It has always seemed curious that most past experiments in general education have focused exclusively--almost compulsively--on the past.

o They have been remarkably inattentive to the crucial common experiences in the contemporary world.

o I believe a quality curriculum should also examine our existence here and now and focus on those contemporary circumstances that also shape our lives.

Here I have three examples to illustrate the point:

o o o

First, we are all engaged in the sending and receiving of messages.

o Language is what makes us a unique species, and all students should be required to master the written and spoken word.

o They should also understand how we use and misuse symbols, how we communicate not just with words, but also with mathematics and music and computers and dance.

Courses in communication should strive for "comprehensive literacy"--the ability to spot the hidden suppositions behind a message.

o Students should, for example, learn how to deal critically with advertising and propaganda.

o By looking at television news, they might elaborate a notion of "tube literacy."

o This emphasis on language is essential not only because it is "the connecting tissue" of our culture, but also because it becomes the tool for other learning.

Second, all of us are caught up in a world of social institutions. We are tied into schools and banks and towns and health plans and clubs, into the entire "structure" of contemporary life. No education has done its job if it does not clarify for students how these structures came to be and where they "fit" into the broader social context.

The guiding logic here is to recognize our common membership in our social structures,

o to clarify their functions,

o and to understand how organizations can and should be changed in light of changing social needs.

o o o

Third, in order to understand ourselves and our contemporary world, we need a course on the meaning of vocation.

We hear a lot of talk these days about "liberal versus vocational" education, and it is suggested that our collegiate traditions are "demeaned" if they lead directly to a job. Such a view not only distorts the present; it also denies the past. Education has always been a blend of inspiration and utility.

It is true of course that some work is not vocation and that some jobs are not uplifting, but degrading.

o But the problem of relating work to education cannot be so easily dismissed.

o Many useful, challenging, and crucial jobs have emerged in recent years, yet schools and colleges still confer "prime legitimacy" on those jobs that have been around the longest and to those we like the best.

Because of tradition, lethargy, ignorance, and snobbery, mindless distinctions are made between what is vocationally "legitimate and illegitimate." Such distinctions have led to equally mindless choices about what can and cannot be offered at the arts and science colleges.

o It is all right, some say, to prepare to be a doctor, but it is less all right to be a nurse.

o It is all right to be an engineer, but to be a computer programmer is off limits.

o Teaching college is just great but teaching elementary school is something else again.

o To dig the ruins of the past is a respectable objective, but to work with ruined lives in an urban jungle -- a much more demanding task -- is not so worthy.

o To read what has been written in the past is fine, but to aspire to write about the present -- as a journalist perhaps -- is not quite legitimate at many arts and science colleges.

What logic is used by those who make distinctions such as these, by those who -- through the curriculum they offer -- determine for their students which work is honorable and which is not?

I believe schools and colleges should be places where students come to understand that, for most of us, work is an expression of who we are and where we fit. "I work, therefore I am" may overstate the case, but it speaks to our condition.

This is not to urge that colleges become vocational. Rather, it is to suggest that we begin to rediscover the true meaning of liberal education.

VI

Finally I propose that universal learning

- o not only look at the heritage we share,
- o and not only reflect on fundamental common experiences of the present,
- o but also focus on those alternatives for the future that in a thousand separate and unsuspected ways are being shaped today.

Such a core course would spend some time looking at the "history of the future."

In many ways societies are held together by their images of the future. It is important to consider the images that earlier cultures have possessed, as well as to look more closely at utopian literature, science fiction, scripture, millenium tracts, and other sources of such images.

- o Who are the social prophets of our time?
- o What images of the future does our society possess?
- o What are our central dogmas, and our stated or unstated forecasts?

These questions too, I am convinced, deserve a place in the experience of every undergraduate.

I suspect we are at a pivotal time in human history, and educators must approach their responsibilities with a sense of confidence and of urgency.

o The human race continues to expand at a rate of 200,000 people a day, or 73 million more people every year.

o And every day more than 800 million people face gnawing hunger, living literally from hand to mouth.

o Tensions over resources grow more acute, and the quality of our environment is threatened.

And here are the central questions we confront -- the curriculum of some future common core:

o Where will we get our food, and how can it be appropriately distributed?

o What about our energy supply, and how can it be equitably shared?

o How can we reduce the poisons in the atmosphere?

o Can we have a proper balance between population and the life-support system of this planet?

o How can we live together, with civility, in a climate of constraint? These are a few of the transcendent issues that today's young people must begin to think about with great care.

VII

One final word.

Dr. Lewis Thomas--author of Lives of a Cell, and a trustee of the Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center -- said recently at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science that these are not the best of times for the human mind.

> All sorts of things seem to be turning out wrong, and the century seems to be slipping through our fingers here at the end, with almost all promises unfilled. I cannot begin to guess at all the causes of our cultural sadness, not even the most important ones, but I can think of one thing that is wrong with us and eats away at us: we do not know enough about ourselves.
>
> We are ignorant about how we work, about where we fit in, and most of all about the enormous, imponderable system of life in which we are embedded as working parts.... It is a new experience for all of us. It's unfamiliar ground.
>
> Just think, two centuries ago we could explain everything about everything, out of pure reason, and now most of that elaborate and harmonious structure has come apart before our eyes.
>
> We are <u>dumb</u>.

Dr. Thomas's appeal is an eloquent one:

- it is a plea for more perspective,
- and it begins by searching for more knowledge about ourselves--where we come from, how we work, where we fit in, and where we want to go.